

Women Against Dowry

INSTEAD of the usual three-line item, the newspapers carried a full report: Tarvinder Kaur, 24, of Model Town, Delhi, had died of burns. While she watched TV on the evening of May 17, her mother-in-law poured kerosene on her clothes and her sister-in-law set her afire. In spite of Tarvinder's dying statement to this effect, the police registered a case of suicide. Her father said she had been under constant pressure to get more dowry from her parents so that her husband could expand his motor spare parts business.

Tarvinder's mother cried, but not alone. Many women in Delhi cried out with loud voices against the murder of young Tarvinder. On June 1, a large group marched through the streets of the middle class colony where her in-laws lived. It was a mixed group—from students and teachers to working women and housewives of all ages with their children.

Shouting angry slogans: "Punish the murderers of Tarvinder", "Stop burning brides", "Women will not put up with any more atrocities", "Do not give or take dowry", they marched to F3/7, the house where Tarvinder was burnt to death. Her in-laws, the Anands, stayed behind closed doors. But as the group approached, an old relative of theirs, seated in the courtyard, read out verses from the Granth Sahib, trying in vain to outshout the demonstrators.

Another relative came out to speak to the press. He said that the Anands had not demanded more dowry since the girl had brought enough of it. "She brought everything you can want—a television set, sofas for the drawing room, clothes... What do we need more for? We have a flourishing business..." He said that a case of 'murder had been registered (this was

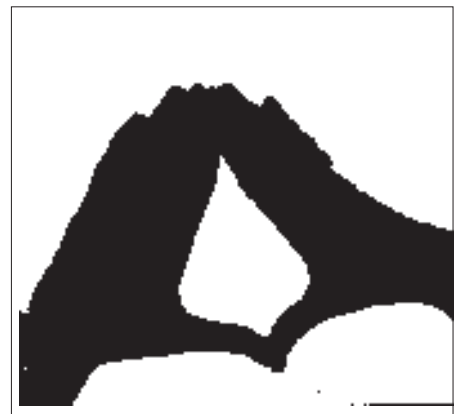
not true) and the girl's husband and in-laws interrogated by the police. "What more do these people want?" he asked, "Do they want their lives'?"

What women want was again forcefully brought out on June 12, when the *Nari Raksha Samiti* organized a large procession from Chandni Chowk to Parliament Street, where a memorandum was presented to the Home Minister. There were working women, housewives with babes in arms, some burkha clad women and washerwomen from as far away as Majnu ka Tila. A man came all the way from Punjab to voice his protest. His sister was reportedly burnt to death by her husband just 14 days after marriage.

The placards read: "Arrest the killers of women", "We will never give dowry nor let women burn", and advocated reform of the marriage system: "All marriages must be registered", "Severely punish bigamists", and "Do not make divorce laws more stringent".

What was highly significant in both these demonstrations was that they were swelled by passers-by and by people coming out of their houses to join in. In fact, those who poured in spontaneously far outnumbered those brought by the organizers. At Model Town, people were so eager to read the leaflets headed "Women are not for Burning", that even after they were all exhausted, the demands kept coming.

This action by women was given wide publicity in the press and on TV. The Delhi State Manila Federation held a women's public meeting on June 26. A resolution was passed urging Government to make dowry a cognizable offence. Also, if a girl dies within seven years of marriage, a post-mortem should be conducted, as is



the law in Punjab. When girls are driven to suicide, the cases should be created as constructive murder.

July dawned with new forms of anti-dowry agitation. Premlata of Daryaganj had been engaged to Vijay Narang of Rana Pratap Bagh. At the time of engagement the boy was given 'advance dowry' (Sagan) worth Rs 15,000. This included cash and goods like a TV and sewing machine. The demands, however, kept growing every day. On May 25, two days before the wedding day, when the girl's relatives went to the boy's house to give the invitation cards for distribution, they were confronted with the demand for a scooter. Says Premlata's uncle: "We came home and discussed the matter till two o'clock at night. Finally we decided, 'If we meet this demand, another will come up—there is no end to it. And such people cannot keep the girl happy.' " So the engagement was broken off, but the money given was not returned by the Narangs.

Premlata's family had read in the papers about the anti-dowry demonstrations. They approached the *Nari Raksha Samiti* and decided to organize a demonstration outside the boy's house to disgrace him and demand their money back. Usually, when an engagement breaks off, the girl's family try their best to conceal the fact, because they fear that people will suspect the girl's character and it will be difficult to get her married.

The courage of this family was truly remarkable. They brought their women onto the streets to openly proclaim that the engagement had been broken due to the greed of the boy's family, thus for once

taking the offensive and shaming the boy. Another significant feature of the protest was its direct anti-dowry tone. Usually, the girl's family dare protest only when the girl has died, and it is the murder, not the dowry in itself that is condemned.

Premlata's family and their supporters, with the women in the forefront, collected outside A 14/3 Rana Pratap Bagh at 10.30 a.m. on July 1. Vociferous slogan shouting : "Why did Vijay not marry ? For a scooter", "Vijay Narang, shame on you", "Vijay will never get a wife", "Vijay will never marry", "Down with dowry", "Shame on those who demand dowry", brought neighbours out of their houses to sympathize. Some narrated how the Narangs had already broken off two earlier engagements after taking large sums of money, and thus were running a regular 'business' with their son's eligibility as capital !

The procession marched round the area. Some of the demonstrators suddenly took up the cry, "Collect alms for Vijay's scooter" and two of them began to carry round a cloth as if asking for money, while a third held up the photograph of Vijay and called on spectators to see the 'beggar'. Later, Premlata's uncle said she would get married but there was no question of dowry now. She would be given the clothes and jewels already prepared for her, no more. The only dispiriting part of the affair was the passivity of the girl herself. When asked what her opinion was, the uncle proudly said, "She is a very homely girl. She never opens her mouth."

On the same day, a large procession was taken out in Patel Nagar to protest against Government and police inaction over the burning to death of Kanchan Chopra. Kanchan, 24, was a stenographer in the UPSC and mother of a four-month-old child. She was being constantly harassed and tortured for more dowry and was rarely allowed to meet her parents.

On June 29, she went straight from office to her parents' house at Malviya Nagar and told them she felt unsafe because her husband and in-laws were persistently demanding money for a scooter, and were ill treating her. Her husband came at night and forced her to

return with him. When she reached home, she was beaten by her husband in the presence of her brother who was also insulted and turned out when he protested. He went to the police station and complained that he feared his sister's life was in danger. The police refused to intervene in 'family affairs'.

In the middle of the night, Kan-chan's parents were informed that she had been badly burnt and admitted to Lohia Hospital. They rushed there but she was already dead. The doctors had not even allowed the police to record her statement while she was conscious. Apparently, she had also been forced to swallow acid to prevent her speaking.

About 200 angry people, many of them residents of Malviya Nagar, held a three hour protest outside the Patel Nagar police station to demand the arrest of Kanchan's husband and in-laws. Shouting slogans against the Chopras, the police and the dowry custom, they squatted outside E-205 West Patel Nagar, where Kanchan was killed and wrote on the walls with chalk that the killers would not be spared. The police had registered a case of attempt to commit suicide but were forced to change it to a murder case, under public pressure. The case was handed over to the Special Cell and the local SHO transferred to police lines, pending enquiry.

Representatives of various women's organizations with family members of murdered women, met the Police Commissioner and Lieutenant Governor to demand immediate action and deplore the inefficiency and corruption of the police and administration in attending to such cases.

But can one hope much from the police and the courts? They have amply demonstrated in these thirty years their inability to provide justice, to protect the oppressed and the victims of social violence and aggression. This is therefore, a task which will have to be performed by all of us through a systematic and sustained campaign against this evil—beginning from our own homes.

Parents who have despairingly let the deaths of their daughters go uninvestigated, because they knew only

too well the callousness of the authorities, or who have been fighting lone battles for months, found a sudden rallying-point when the recent protests took place. They came in contact with each other and felt a certain renewal of hope.

Like Mr. Nair with his bag full of xeroxed letters describing his daughter's death, which have been submitted to so many authorities and received no reply. Like Ms. Chandel, who joined the Model Town march. Her daughter died two years ago, when the press and the public were silent and no action was taken. Like Ms. Chadha whose life and whose consciousness have been transformed after her daughter's murder—she's now fighting not just her daughter's case, but actively participates in all anti-dowry protests, even bringing her younger girl along with her !

Yet it is other women, other mothers like these, who burn their daughters-in-law. This most disturbing reality was sharply focused when some members of a women's organization went to Patel Nagar on July 3, for a demonstration which failed to materialize.

While the Chopras remained behind closed doors, dozens of men, women and children streamed out of neighbouring houses. They were aggressive: "Why have you come here ? Ask us the facts. We know."

While the men sneered: "What will these interfering busybodies do? They've been hired to come here for five rupees each. The police will pass judgement, not they", the women swarmed around. They shouted each other down: "She locked herself in a room and killed herself. What is the use of such education when parents don't teach their daughters how to behave in their husband's house? Cursed be such education !"

"But why did she kill herself ?"

"How do we know? Nowadays, girls can't put up with the smallest thing—they get into a temper."

"And how is it no one heard anything?"

One hardfaced old hag raises her hands to the sky: "God knows where she got such fortitude. She burnt to death without uttering a cry."

Another advises us: 'Teach your

daughters patience. Girls must learn to bear everything patiently.”

A newly married woman grins: “What is it to do with us? Forget it.” Her friend agrees: “The one who had to die has died. What’s the use of making a noise about it?”

The viciousness on their faces is like something in a nightmare; would seem exaggerated on the stage or screen. The local police arrive—obviously in league with them. And horror of horrors! For once, there is no difference between the brutal expression on the faces of policemen and citizens.

As we walk away, a young housewife smiles menacingly from her doorway: “So you’ve come here to fight? Come along, we’ll teach you a lesson!” We stare at her, speechless. She waves her hand: “Go to hell”, and pours out a stream of abuses.

An old man sitting at the doorstep glares at us, folds his hands: “Go, go, please go” The whole neighbourhood is out in the street, murder written large on their faces. Concentrated hostility in the air like the heat before the storm. Someone whispers that four dowry deaths have taken place in this locality in the space of a year.

What is it that has turned these women against each other— mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, sister against brother’s wife? Is it the fear that the precious male, the son, will turn away and love his wife, leaving his sister helpless, neglecting to pay her dowry? Is it the necessity to extract as much as possible from the daughter-in-law so that the daughters can be married? How does the same mother who is humiliated by her arrogant son-in-law, who trembles for her daughter’s happiness in an alien home, find it so easy to tyrannize and torture her son’s wife?

As long as we women are divided against ourselves, as long as we see ourselves not as women but as some man’s wife or mother our struggle is hopeless. We are our own destroyers. We look to men for salvation—we hope for good husbands, brothers who will protect us, (however badly they may be treating their own wives).

The woman who has been degraded, beaten, insulted through a whole lifetime takes her revenge on her helpless daughter-in-law—perhaps the first person who is in her power, whom *she* can beat and insult. How can her bitterness be transformed into a constructive protest, a collective rather than a personal anger?

Above all, how can a woman who has never been recognised as a valuable human being learn to value others, how can she who has never known tenderness, feel tender to human life? Why should not she, whose silent screams have gone unheard, turn a deaf ear to the shrieks of the girl burning next door, or in her own kitchen?

She has been made to think of this as ‘normal’, ‘a woman’s fate’. Religion, the films, her elders, her own, her mother’s experience, all tell her that if a woman is unhappy, nothing can be done about it. It must be her own fault. And she who has been denied happiness and freedom, grudges them to her daughter-in-law, who may be educated, employed, who has

access to a world she has never seen. She grudges them even to her own daughter. Most mothers are viciously rigid in denying their daughters the liberty they themselves were not allowed: ‘I never had such freedom. Why can’t you do without it, too? Why should you complain?’ How can a systematically deadened mind and heart be brought to life? Our problem is too complex, the task of women’s organizations too vast for any simple solution to be put forward. Our agitation to help ourselves realize our predicament, has to be a sustained one and permeate every aspect of women’s lives—not remain just sporadic outbursts of anger in issue-to-issue demonstrations. The narrow cultural and social world of women which extends only to the market place, the temple and the Hindi film, must be enlarged. We need new instruments of consciousness raising if women are to stop seeing themselves as belonging to various families, to various men, and begin to see other women as sisters—even though not born of the same biological parents.

Untitled

*Mother-in-law, don't fume in the kitchen
and swear at your daughter-in law.*

*Did you get her in payment of a debt?
Or did you buy her with cash?*

*Father-in-law, tough as a rank shoot
from a rotten chestnut stump,*

*Mother-in-law, skinny and wrinkled
as cowdung dried in the sun,*

*Sister-in-law, sharp as a gimlet poking
through the side of a three-year-old basket,*

*Your son has bloody faeces
and is like weeds in a field of wheat,*

*a miserable yellow cucumber flower.
How can you criticize a daughter-in-law*

*who's like a morning glory
blooming in loamy soil?*

Anonymous, Korea